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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how emotional reactions to the job search, especially in the new economy, can adversely influence an individual's effectiveness. It suggests that career counselors and coaches can assist clients with some of the emotional aspects of the job search without referring these people to other mental health professionals. There are new paradigmatic shifts in the career world that can have the impact of eliciting inappropriate emotional responses. Some of these major shifts are noted. Regardless, only by addressing the emotional barriers of the career search will people be able to be employed in the jobs they want. A discussion of some of the emotional reactions that individuals have in the career search resulted in offering two remedies for assisting people to break through their emotional barriers: development of the career identity and establishment of the portfolio career. (MKA)

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by

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Dancing Through the Emotional Aspects of the Career Search

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Introduction

Emotions color the job search, job change and job placement process every step of the way, often blocking individual effectiveness. Emotions always have. But, in today's economically strong yet largely unstable employment market, changing jobs is occurring at an unprecedented rate. Ominous newspaper headlines abound with gloomy reports; "software maker Novell cuts 16 percent of its work force", while "35 percent of the employees are dropped by Drkoop.com" and, "Steven Spielberg's Pop.com bursts before ever forming a bubble." Meanwhile, WorldCom and Sprint expect takeovers.

The emotional anxiety and fallout from rapid, dramatic changes such as these are more than likely to severely and adversely affect the job change process. Inappropriate emotional reactions can block a job seeker's effectiveness at different times and stages of each job search. That has always been true. But when today's dot-coms become dot-bombs overnight, career changers need to maintain emotional strength more than ever during the job search.

This submission is far too brief to cover the myriad emotional components of the job search. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate how individuals can identify and break through the emotional blocks that keep them from securing the jobs they want. It also introduces an understanding of the new paradigmatic shifts that are taking place in the career world that make emotional balance more essential than ever. And, the paper advocates the understanding of the importance of one's career identity in eliminating negative emotional reactions like self doubt, fear, rage, anxiety and depression.

The material herein will help business and career consultants become sensitive to the dramatic changes in the work world. Career counselors will learn to develop strategies to assist clients with defining and utilizing their "career identity". Job changers may discover their own adverse emotional reactions and learn to develop strategies that keep them from being disempowered.

The paper has three components: paradigmatic shifts in the career world, the types of reactions that people experience to these shifts, and some suggestions for eliminating inappropriate reactions through the understanding and utilization of the career identity and portfolio career.

Paradigmatic Career Shifts Resulting from the New Economy

Major paradigmatic shifts have taken place in the last few years that have not only affected how many workers feel about their jobs but have confronted the foundations of traditional theories of careers and life planning. The landscape of the career counselor and career coach is changing dramatically. The internet and the new economy can be simultaneously praised and blamed for these shifts. Accordingly, the shifts have elicited a variety of emotional reactions that are a part of the career decision making and life planning process. Some of these shifts are listed below:

1. Millions of new jobs with new titles are now developed over the short term. An unpublished report released by Anderson Consulting predicts that 10 million people will be in internet related jobs by the year 2002. Contrast that with the 2.6 million workers in internet related jobs in 1998.

2. People are tethered to their jobs and some families go so far as to suggest that they are "shipwrecked" by the new technology. The "at home" availability of fax machines, cell phones, and pagers have created a blur between work time and non-work time and a gray line between work and home. More than a few stories are unceremoniously suggesting that work in the new economy is never finished.

3. The willingness to take risks on the job has become an ever more important credential in the new economy, as companies struggle to stay competitive. With this, career or job "failure" such as job loss and outplacement has in fact become an odd new credential as companies seek competitive intelligence from rivals or new upstarts who have failed. There is a premium in knowing what not to do; workers from failed concerns have that knowledge.

4. The young entrepreneur has become the basis of some power in the new economy. Even the comic strip Doonsebury addresses conflicts between children and their parents as the offspring plan "in the next few months to be worth ten times more than" their parents will have earned in their entire lives.

5. In seeming conflict with this idea is the ironic belief that establishing a strong corporate reputation may be more important than making money. Many workers in the new economy want to establish a solid new reputation for themselves. The proliferation of new computer hackers illustrates the point. As they develop their own reputations, they are also redefining success in the new economy. Reputation, not income, is their trophy.

6. With the rapidly changing economy, the tasks individuals are hired for may not necessarily be what they end up doing. Workers need a new flexibility toward what they do. They need a willingness to upgrade skills through continuing education, modeling, mentoring and on the job training.

7. Individuals in the internet world hope to work less, retire earlier and engage in different activities which do not demand earning potential. People profess an interest in entering politics, volunteering or serving as community agency advocates after they make their "killing" with a new IPO.

8. Job changers may be shifting their companies as frequently as three times per year. And those who are shifting tend to be hired more frequently to be a part of a project instead of having a formal position that will last for years. Some even refer to this as a project driven economy.

9. Job searchers are now using the internet in astounding numbers. There are thousands of currently available career web sites. Individuals search, post resumes, apply for positions and

can even be interviewed on the internet. The traditional face to face interview is giving way to new corporate interview strategies whereby potential employees are invited to a central location where they enter a kiosk with a computer screen and respond to interview questions given forth by a "talking head."

These are a few of the paradigmatic shifts; all career counselors, coaches and job changers will need to attend to these. But in the meantime, the shifts are eliciting a variety of negative emotional reactions.

Counterproductive Mind Sets

The rapidly changing career world and the paradigmatic shifts noted above have led to a series of potentially vexing counterproductive mind sets. Among them are feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, overwhelmingness, and low self esteem.

What has been an unfortunate response by many career counselors and coaches over the years is that they haven't taken these reactive personal issues to be a part of their counseling process. Many have felt more comfortable referring these issues to others in the mental health professions rather than rightfully assuming that this material is the bailiwick of the career counselor.

With the new economy, some career clients appear to experience a greater degree of hopelessness. Its like having "missed the boat" in some way if they are not able to transcend their current positions and join the dot-com world. They also appear to be somewhat helpless in determining what they can change and where they enter the economy. Corporate instability has reduced optimism among job seekers, even though the unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in years.

Today's job seekers feel overwhelmed by the search process and what they need to know in order to be competitive. When overwhelmingness is added to hopelessness and helplessness, they begin to experience a lowering of self worth. Their skills and experience don't appear to matter in today's world.

Career counselors can inculcate a new sense of hope in the client. A good career counselor will always and forever have one more good idea that can be a part of the change process. And while they inculcate hope, they can also help clients confront their own feelings of helplessness. They can guide clients to understand what they can change and what they can't. They can demonstrate, through example, that success often goes hand in hand with failure. People who fail a lot are also those who try a lot. Baseball star Ricky Henderson exemplifies the point. He holds the record for the most stolen bases; he also hold the record for getting caught the most. Likewise Edison and Salk demonstrate many failures along with their successes.

Career professionals can assist those who feel overwhelmed. Overwhelmingness can be addressed by giving up the idea of trying to accomplish every career related task at once. Clients can be taught to handle activities related to their search one step at a time. Activities can be broken into their lowest common denominator and addressed as a series of simple, discrete steps. Small changes eventually lead to larger changes. Appropriate goals can be set while avoiding the tendency to seek perfection.

Its also important for counselors to help the new career searchers with their tendency to label themselves negatively, affecting their self esteem. They need to learn how they matter to themselves and to others. The loss of work is often related to the loss of the sense of mattering.

There is the unfortunate tendency for career clients to undervalue their potential. The new career terrain has made many feel like they can't compete or that they will join the "wrong" firm. In order for clients to make appropriate decisions and avoid the dot-bomb, they are going to have to learn a new style of research and study. They will need to screen companies, their corporate revenues, and their boards of directors. They will also need to explore and evaluate any new product or service and determine through due diligence and networking whether it appears to be something worthwhile. Curiously, they will need to learn to not jump at the first opportunity that they are offered.

Above all, career clients will need to engage in an evaluative process that is more about process than it is about outcome. Clients will need to learn to value the effort they expend in the career search process, not just the outcome of getting a job. By valuing the process, they can begin to enjoy a whole new dynamic. They will learn to embrace change while redefining their concept of success. They will learn a new "give and take" in the career development process as they look for work that will help to add new skills to their repertoire rather than simply revenue to their checkbook.

With this new kind of model building, clients will experience fewer fears. These new learning strategies will address their fears of failure while preparing them for better positions in the future.

While these are certainly strategies that can help career clients wade through the murkier parts of the new landscape, perhaps the two most important components to address are the establishment of the career identity and the development of the portfolio career.

Career Identity and the Portfolio Career

Two very powerful means of confronting the current job market and the emotional reactions to the job search are in the establishment of the client's career identity and the development of a portfolio career for the client.

The career identity is a somewhat complex concept that is focused upon an individual's calling. Its the "kernel of all that you hope to become...the nucleus of work place confidence" (Chope, 2000). It represents the accrual of experience, skills, interests, values and personal characteristics. But most people can't define who they are in the work world. If they were suddenly stopped with video camera rolling and asked to say in thirty seconds who they are in the work world, most could not.

But a strong, focused career identity, the capacity to define who you are in today's economy is empowering. A well articulated career identity can assist in preserving both interest and excitement in pursuing work in the new economy.

It can be a most interesting exercise to have a client discover their career identity. Chope (2000) has suggested six different approaches to the process. In sum, the equation that emerges gives a sense of purpose to a job seeker's immediate task. Knowing one's own career identity is perhaps the strongest defense against inappropriate emotional reactions during the job search process.

Chope suggests the following techniques in understanding a person's career identity:

1. Create a thirty second advertising sound bite describing who you are in the work world. This can be used to describe oneself to potential employers but can also be used to identify who you are to those who are best able to help you. After developing the

sound bite, it becomes essential to practice it so that it flows with distinction and comfort as it is passed on to others.

2. Name the position you are looking for. This naming of the position ensures that you have researched the job market through resources like the web and can easily identify the kind of work that is suitable for you. This is the application of the identity to a specific career position

3. Create a career genogram. The career genogram is like a family tree that shows you how and where career choice fits into the family system. It can aid in developing the career identity because it can be used to understand the origins of family expectations and judgments about careers, as well as the family's definition of success. It can help job seekers note the congruence between their expectations and those of their family. It can also suggest how the different patterns of career choice within the family have affected the choices that the job seeker has made.

4. Career identity can also be understood by determining how it was shaped through different critical life events. Using a life stage developmental approach, job seekers can examine the particular driving and restraining forces that have had an impact in developing a career identity. Within this same exercise, it is possible to explore different types of life fantasies that affected the fledgling career identity.

Fantasized careers can often resemble the idealized self. The narrower the chasm between the idealized self and the real self, the greater the possibility of experiencing both career and personal satisfaction.

5. Career identity can also be discovered through the use of the career as a developing story, sometimes referred to as the narrative approach. Basically, this approach consists of writing or tape recording your career journey as an interesting novella. The career as a story can be useful in helping a job seeker define aspirations and interests. It can also be edited and rewritten, much like a journal. And, if need be, you can write the idealized ending.

6. Finally, career identity can be explored by asking a simple question. What would you do if you won a seven million dollar lottery? Expectations of yourself, what you want to do and who you want to do it with are all wrapped up in the answer to this question.

The six exercises that help to establish the career identity can be used in different ways during the search to eliminate self doubt, manage rage and anger and overcome career barriers. But another component of a good career search can emerge from the career identity. This is the conceptualization and development of the portfolio career.

The portfolio career has been characterized as a composite career consisting of more than one income stream. In truth, people have had these for years. For example, people with day shift jobs may also "moonlight" from time to time. Students may work several different jobs while also attending classes in high school and college.

Developing a portfolio career allows individuals to become more flexible and less fearful in the job market. In a project driven economy they can work several projects at once.

Psychologists who have developed portfolio careers have been able to avoid some of the hassles that have resulted from the impact of the managed care industry. To illustrate, some psychologists have one income stream from practice, then add another by teaching. They may

also have a third stream in executive coaching and consultation. A fourth may develop from writing while a fifth may emerge from public speaking or the delivery of keynote addresses.

As this illustrates, a portfolio career model allows for the increased security of employment. There is greater diversification, greater flexibility and a direct confrontation of anxiety and self doubt through the pinpointing of clearly identifiable market niches.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper attempts to demonstrate how emotional reactions to the job search, especially in the new economy, can adversely influence an individual's effectiveness. The paper further suggests that career counselors and coaches can assist clients with some of the emotional aspects of the job search without referring these people to other mental health professionals.

There are new paradigmatic shifts in the career world that can have the impact of eliciting inappropriate emotional responses. Some of these major shifts are noted herein. But regardless, only by addressing the emotional barriers of the career search will people be able to be employed in the jobs they want.

A discussion of some of the emotional reactions that individuals have in the career search resulted in offering two remedies for assisting people to break through their emotional barriers. One method is the development of the career identity. The second is the establishment of the portfolio career.

As demonstrated, therefore, career counselors need to feel that some of the emotional issues of their clients can be handled by them rather than referring them out to others. Perhaps this paper is a step in assisting them in that direction.

Reference

Chope, R.C. (2000). *Dancing Naked: Breaking Through the Emotional Limits that Keep You From the Job You Want*. Oakland, CA.: New Harbinger Publications.